[Theme music ‘Some Spooky Sh*t Is Going On Here’ by Theo Goodwin plays.]

INTRO

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The Underwood Collection, Episode Three: Woman In White

[Tape recorder clicks on. Tape static is heard continually throughout.]

ULYSSES
Statement of Soledad Rubio-Gonzalez, regarding a series of strange encounters with a hitchhiker.
(Yawning.)
Sorry, um...

Original statement given 24th July, 2014.
Apparently Adriene said I’m supposed to say the month first, because this is America, but I’m the one recording and it’s not like she’s my *boss* or anything…
(They pause.)
N- no, she- she is- she is *very* much my boss. *And* she listens to these…
I’m going to re-record this.

[Tape recorder clicks off, then back on again.]

Statement of Soledad Rubio-Gonzalez, regarding a series of strange encounters with a hitchhiker. Original statement given July 24th, 2014. Recording by UC Bamba, assistant curator of the Usher Foundation, Washington, DC.

Statement begins.

I hate driving alone at night. I hate the way every shadow holds immeasurable darkness, hate the way the woods loom at the edge of the road's sanctuary. I hate the way I only ever feel as safe as far as the car lights shine.

I hate nights like the one when it all happened, too, when the mist coils itself around everything and turns the air murky, when the wet air slinks down the back of your neck and makes something sharp crawl down your spine.

This kind of night was different, though. Not *so* different from a lot of the nights I've had before: late, pitch-black, the moon hovering in the sky as I drove away from a stupid decision… but different enough. My ex-girlfriend had called me, you see, and well, I was feeling too bold and too lonely to turn her down. I don't think you need the details of all that.

I regretted it all, though, as I sped away from her apartment. It was the kind of drive where it feels as though your heart is under the wheels rather than asphalt, and you speed up like the car can hurt you more than the crushing weight already in your chest.

The mist was so thick that if I had been driving any faster, I never would have seen the woman on the side of the road.

She just stood there, unmoving as the wind swirled the white fabric of her dress around her, looking as though she was wearing the mist that crept across the ground. Her skin was dark and gleamed in what little moonlight peered through the clouds, and her hair melted into a halo of shadow around her serene face.

There was a gravity to her, as if she had hooked something into my mind and was slowly reeling me in. I didn't mind too much.

I found myself pulling over at the side of the road, tires crunching off of gravel and onto soft earth. When the car rolled to a stop, the woman now stood in front of the passenger's side door, and when she saw me, she smiled. It was the kind of smile that almost wasn't there, with a whisper of amusement, like she knew something no one else did.

"Are you lost?" I tried to say, but no words came. The woman tilted her head slightly to one side, soft black curls swaying in the wind as she did so. There was something about her eyes, black as the night around us, that made me feel as though I were floating.

Somewhere in the fog of my thoughts, it occurred to me that I ought to offer the woman a ride. It was dark, and the road was so far out of the way it would surely be ages before someone else came along, and there was no guarantee that the next person who stopped would have pure intentions.

I tried to say all this, but the offer died on my lips. It didn't seem to matter, though, for the woman locked eyes with me and began to step towards my car.

She opened the car door, slowly, and the worn metal hinges screeched as she silently took her place in the ripped, pleather seat. Neither of us

spoke as the door closed with a slam, a feeling of finality hanging in the night air outside.

I didn’t know where I was going anymore when the car began moving again.

It’s a miracle I didn’t veer off the road or collide with another driver, because all I could do was stare at her.

I don’t know how long I drove for, the steering wheel turning under my hands of what felt like was its own accord. The radio had begun to crackle, a low, unending static that grated on me terribly, but I couldn’t seem to make myself reach over and fiddle with the controls, so on it went, a droning buzz that never seemed to cease. The woman was quiet, looking out the windshield like she was looking for something in the night. She was motionless, her hands folded calmly in her lap, and she didn’t seem to blink, not once.

It was when she turned to look at me and the car suddenly sputtered to a stop that I began to become concerned. Both headlights went dark and every blinking icon on the dashboard winked out, one by one, and the static on the radio seemed to grow louder and louder until it was almost deafening.

Everything in me told me to pump the gas pedal, to twist the key in the ignition until the lights came back on, to run , if nothing else.

But I couldn’t move. I saw my hands clutching at their place on the steering wheel, the knuckles white. It felt as though something had replaced the blood in my veins, something so cold that it burned as it kept me frozen in place.

I remember looking over at the woman, who sat there, silent and staring at me, and I didn’t know whether to ask for help or for mercy.

Something in the woman's eyes and the paralyzing cold in my limbs kept me there, rooted to the spot for what felt like forever, like a dead tree that could never be felled.

Who are you? I wanted to ask, but the words were a leaden weight on my tongue.

The woman leaned forward, and her whole body seemed to flicker as she did so. For a moment, there was nothing beside me, and when the woman appeared again, she was close enough that I could have felt her breath on my cheek. But the woman was not breathing, and so I felt nothing but afraid as two brown hands the color of rich soil came up to cup my face.

The woman's hands were like ice, but something electric thrummed under the cold skin, and a part of me wanted to lean into the touch. But I could only sit there, frozen as the woman held my face. It was so gentle, her touch, and underneath all the coldness, her skin was soft. An icy thumb skirted across my cheek, wiping away something hot, and I realized that I had begun to cry.

The woman's lips parted and moved wordlessly, and though no sound came from them, that did not stop the faint hum that seemed to seep from some dark corner of my mind and twist itself into something like a voice.

Delia, it said, and for all the fear I felt, there was something beautiful in the way the voice echoed through my mind, like someone had struck a chime within the cavernous walls of a cathedral. I wanted to hear it again

and again and again, until my ears bled from the force of it. I wanted to sing it to the sky and roll it over on my tongue forever.

The woman, Delia, now, closed the already minute distance between us, and a breath caught in my throat at the press of cold, soft lips to mine. Something warm bloomed in my ribcage, small yet desperate and roaring, and all I could do was close my eyes. All the hurt in my chest from the past few months seemed to melt away as she kissed me, and I wanted to run my frozen hands through the dark curls of her hair.

All the cold suddenly ebbed away, and I felt the heat of the summer night come rushing into me so thick and fast I choked on the warm air. When I'd finally finished gasping for breath, I opened my eyes, and saw there was nothing and no one in the passenger seat. Delia was gone, and all that remained in her place was a swath of white fabric.
And I was alone.

I sat there in my car for what felt like years, staring at the empty seat. The radio had ceased its distorted song, and I was left with a ringing silence in my ears and the rumble of the car engine. After some time, I swallowed down the salt on my tongue, and drove on. It took me nearly three hours to get home again, as I'd driven quite a long distance from my intended destination, and instead of my apartment, I'd ended up near a small, unremarkable town with a half-dim gas station and an awful data signal. But

I made it home all the same, and collapsed onto my bed with a heavy feeling in my chest and a single name, repeating over and over in my mind: Delia, Delia, Delia.

I didn't think I'd ever see her again. I didn't expect to. It was nearly two months later when I finally managed to get past it, in a sense. The piece

of fabric stayed in my car, some shred of white silk that smelled like the air before a thunderstorm and old books with cracked yellow pages. I couldn't make myself get rid of it, for some reason. Every time I went to throw it out, it just ended up tucked into the glove box.

I say I got past it but, well...I've never been very good at moving on. I had a feeling that it was a fluke, a strange experience that I would never have again. And it saddened me, in an odd way, that I would never feel Delia's kiss again. I'm quite used to disappointment, however, and so I managed.

I can't remember much about the next time. I woke up from some arbitrary dream, long since forgotten, to the sound of a low buzzing. I thought maybe it was some kind of bug that had managed to worm its way into my apartment, but as the sleep began to clear from my head, I realized it was the digital clock on my nightstand. I fumbled for my glasses next to it for a better look, only to see that red numbers were flickering, and a steady whirring of static seemed to come from it. A familiar static, at that.

As my eyes adjusted to the dimness of the room, something fluttered in my periphery. I turned my head to follow it, and saw her. Delia, that is, was standing at my window, gazing down and out into the street, wearing the same white dress she'd been wearing before. I don't think I screamed. I don't think I made any sound at all. But she lifted her chin and turned her face in my direction all the same. Our eyes met, and as I drowned in the depth of her dark stare, she smiled softly, and began to step towards my bed. I felt my heart seize for a moment, not in fear but in the throes of some overwhelming fervor that I couldn't put a name to.

I should have been more afraid, but mostly I just felt relieved. She'd come back. She'd come back.

My heart beat faster as she settled onto the mattress around to me, kneeling in a way that made the white silk of her dress fan out around her like a radiant flower. I tried to say her name, but she just leaned forward and lay a single finger over my lips. A perfect curl fell into her eyes, and I lifted a trembling hand to tuck it behind her ear; as I did so, my fingertips brushed the dark brown of her cheek and found it colder than ice. I felt it again, that feeling, like there was static humming under her skin, like lightning crackling along wires and water, and I suddenly became lightheaded.

Delia’s smile grew a bit wider, and I now saw the barest gleam of white teeth behind her perfect lips. There was so much I wanted to ask her, so much permission I wanted to gain, but I couldn't find the words. I don’t think it mattered. I think she already knew.

She leaned closer, and kissed my cheek softly, slowly, deliberate in the way she lingered as my skin warmed her lips. When she drew away, I let out a breath I didn’t know I had been holding, and she lay down next to me, her black hair spread out over the pillows like wisps of a spider’s web.

I could have kicked myself for the way I fell back asleep, somehow. I don’t remember how, exactly. I just remember her hand on my cheek, her thumb rubbing soft, cool circles, and the smell of petrichor and old books pressing weights onto my eyelids until I drifted into a new dream. When I woke up the next morning, she was gone, and though the clock on my nightstand had stopped buzzing, its numbers had stayed frozen, some few minutes after midnight.

Five months it stayed like that, and five months Delia stayed gone.

But she did come back, and it was just like before. And then she left, and came back again. And again. And again. She was gone longer each time, but I waited, because it was worth it, wasn't it? For a glimpse of her smile, for a moment of her frozen touch. It was worth it, because even though she never warmed my bed, there was a chance, wasn't there? That the next time she came back, she might stay for good?

The last time I saw her was near ten months ago. She hasn't come back yet, but I'll wait.

I'll always wait.

Statement-
(Snort of laughter.)
Statement ends. Sorry-
(Laughter, cut off by the tape turning off temporarily.)

Good *God*. I have not had enough sleep to deal with- *whatever* this was. The fact that it won't record to my computer means that this is a genuine experience someone's had with the supernatural-

(More laughter.)
Sorry. The Lonely, I'd say, considering the- *pining* of it all. There's *really* some poor sap out there waiting for a ghost to come kiss her once a year.

(They pause.)

Well. Got off easy, I'd say.

End recording.

[Theme plays.]

OUTRO

The Underwood Collection is a podcast produced and distributed by the Pitch Library Creative Team. Find us on Twitter @PitchLibrary, on Tumblr at www.pitchlibrary.tumblr.com, or contact us by sending an email to usherfoundation@gmail.com. The Underwood Theme was written by Theodore Goodwin and the Underwood Logo was created by Mae B. Thank you for listening.

[Theme ends.]